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THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODS

NOTES ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF HENRI BERGSON

I. ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM AND IMMEDIATISM

THE appearance almost simultaneously of English translations of Bergson's principal works¹ is significant of the author's rapid growth in fame and influence. All three translations have been revised by the author himself, and to the "Matter and Memory" he has contributed a new introduction by his own hand. Considering the peculiarly idiomatic character of the original text, the translations are admirable both in clearness and fidelity, and should make Bergson's philosophy readily accessible to the English reader.

Of the three, the "Matter and Memory" will probably receive the least attention, despite the fact that in the estimation of many of his colleagues it will remain his soundest and most rigorous contribution to technical philosophy. This book, especially in respect of its treatment of "pure perception," is comparatively realistic and naturalistic.² The "Time and Free Will," and "Creative Evolution," on the other hand, sound the more speculative note. They contain the assault upon "intellectualism," and the exposition of a metaphysical "dynamism," or "activism." On this side Bergson borders upon the voluntaristic and romanticist developments of German idealism. Together with Eucken, Rickert, and others, he is an advisory editor of *Logos*, the organ of the new idealistic revival. If Bergson is in this rôle less original and unique, he is not on that account less influential. He is identified with a present tendency which promises to be widely popular, and which is already in the ascendant in the thought and culture of Germany. As between the phi-

¹"Time and Free Will," a translation of Bergson's "Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience," by F. L. Pogson, Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1910, pp. xxiii + 252; "Creative Evolution," a translation of "L'évolution créatrice," by Arthur Mitchell, Henry Holt & Co., 1911, pp. xv + 407; "Matter and Memory," a translation of "Matière et mémoire," by N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer, Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1911, pp. xx + 339.

²Cf. Ch. I., and the introduction to the translation.

losophy of immediacy and activity, which is already a gospel, and will shortly be a faith; and the philosophy of analysis, which is necessarily a critique, and to the most sanguine belief even a disillusionment, Bergson is flatly on the side of the former. In the comment which follows I shall have to do not with the psychological and biological Bergson, but with this speculative and prophetic Bergson. I shall deal in the present paper with his attack upon intellectualism, and in a second paper with his doctrine of freedom and creative activity.

Of eminent contemporary writers belonging to the pragmatist school in the broad sense, Bergson is the most radical "anti-intellectualist." In his opinion intellect not only divides and separates reality, thus replacing its concrete fulness with abstracted and partial aspects; but is doomed to failure, however far its activities may be carried. Intellect can not, in short, correct itself, and atone for its own shortcomings. The cause for this inevitable failure lies in the fact that intellect is essentially the instrument of action. For the purpose of action it is necessary to specify and fixate some present aspect of the environment. The object of action must be distinguished and held by the attention. Through the repetition of such attitudes the intellect elaborates a scheme, or diagram, in which the several terms of analysis are correlated. They remain distinct and external, but are woven by relations into a system, which is like its component terms in being stereotyped and fixed. The pattern of all such systems is geometry, the most perfect expression of the analytical method. The sign of the intellect's handiwork is spacial juxtaposition and arrangement, the static coordination of discriminated elements. In vain, then, does the intellect seek to correct itself—for the further it proceeds the more thoroughly does it reduce reality to this form.

And it is this form itself, and not any specific or incomplete phase of it, that is foreign to the native, aboriginal quality of reality. The latter abides, not in fixity, but in fluidity; not in sharpness of outline, but in adumbration; not in external juxtaposition, but in interpenetration; not in discreteness, but in continuity; not in space, but in time. The helplessness of the intellect to escape its own inveterate habits appears most strikingly in its treatment of time. For it spacializes even this, conceiving it as a linear series of instants; whereas real time is an *enduring* (*durée réelle*)—a continuous and cumulative history, a growing old. And this real time we do not think; we "live it, because life transcends intellect."³

Bergson's indictment of the intellectual method rests, I am convinced, on a misunderstanding of that method. In the first place,

³ "Creative Evolution," p. 46. Cf. Ch. I., *passim*.

Bergson is not clear as to whether a concept is to be distinguished by its function or its content. Is "concept" the same as "idea," or is it a special class of ideas? This question is of crucial importance. For if "concept" is only another name for "idea," and if an idea is essentially a function or office, and not a content, then the failure of concepts must mean simply the failure of the ideating or mediating operation of thought. But this operation, according, at least, to the pragmatist account, is essentially a mode of access to immediacy. The more it is perfected the more unerringly it leads us into the presence of its object. To prove that intellect is essentially instrumental, and then to attack it in behalf of the very end for which it is useful, would be a strange procedure. In fact the anti-intellectualist perpetually employs intellect in this sense, even with reference to "reality." He uses words and figures of speech which he hopes will conduct the reader or hearer to the immediate experience in which it is revealed. The anti-intellectualist would have no ground for maintaining that there is any reality which can not be represented, for he means by representation only a pointing or guiding, for which anything may serve. And whatever is experienced or felt can be represented in this sense, because it is necessary only that it should have a locus or context to which one may be directed.

We must suppose, then, that what the anti-intellectualist attacks is not the idea as such, but a certain class of ideas, such as the logical or mathematical ideas, "term" and "line." But it should be observed that for pragmatism the content of an idea is accidental. "Term" and "line" are ideas only when *used* in a certain way. In themselves they are simply characteristic bits of experience. They may be immediately known or presented, as well as used in discursive thought. Even "abstractions" may be apprehended by a direct act of discrimination, and it is only in such direct apprehension that their specific character is revealed. It can not be claimed that such bits of experience as "term" and "line" are peculiarly ill fitted to serve as ideas, because, as we have seen, the content of an idea is irrelevant. *Any* bit of experience will do, as is best illustrated by the case of words. In short the fault, if there be any, can not lie in the intellectual use of these elements; it must lie in their inherent character. The anti-intellectualist polemic must mean that reality is not such as "term" and "line"; or that these characters are somehow contradicted and overruled by the dominant characters of reality, such as continuity and life. But this contention rests, I think, on a second misunderstanding.

There is an inveterate liability to confuse a symbolized relation

with a relation of symbols. It is commonly supposed that when a complex is represented by a formula, the elements of the complex must have the same relation as that which subsists between the parts of the formula; whereas, as a matter of fact, *the formula as a whole* represents or describes a complex other than itself. If I describe *a* as "to the right of" *b*, does any difficulty arise because in my formula *a* is to the left of *b*? If I speak of *a* as greater than *b*, am I to assume that because my symbols are outside one another *a* and *b* must be outside one another? Such a supposition would imply a most naïve acceptance of that very "copy theory" of knowledge which pragmatism has so severely condemned. And yet such a supposition seems everywhere to underlie the anti-intellectualist's polemic. The intellect is described as "substituting for the interpenetration of the real terms the juxtaposition of their symbols";⁴ as though analysis discovered terms, and then *conferred* relations of its own. Whereas, as James, for example, has been at much pains to point out,⁵ terms and relations have the same status. Terms are found *in* relation, and may be thus described without any more artificiality, without any more imposing of the forms of the mind on its subject-matter, than is involved in the bare mention of a single term.

It is this misunderstanding which underlies the anti-intellectualist's contention that continuity can not be described. "For," says James in his exposition of Bergson, "you can not make continuous being out of discontinuities, and your concepts are discontinuous. The stages into which you analyze a change are *states*, the change itself goes on between them. It lies along their intervals, inhabits what your definition fails to gather up, and thus eludes conceptual explanation altogether."⁶ I can understand this argument only provided the author assumes that the intellectualist tries to reproduce continuity by *adding concept to concept*. The successive and discontinuous *terms of the representation* are then held to be contrary to the continuity of the subject-matter. But the assumption is incorrect. A line, for example, may be conceived as a class of positions possessing interrelations of direction and distance. This conception may be represented by the formula, *a . . . c . . . d . . . n . . .* One may then add the statement that between any two positions such as *a* and *c*, there is a third position, *b*, which is after *a* and before *c*; thus expressly denying that there is the same hiatus between the positions of the line as appears between the symbols of the representation. The use of the symbols *a*, *c*, etc., indicates the manifoldness and serial

⁴ "Time and Free Will," p. 134.

⁵ Cf., e. g., "A Pluralistic Universe," Appendix A.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

order of the positions, and the statement defines their "compactness." With such a formula and such a statement one may *mean* continuity, despite the fact that the symbols and words are discrete. The word "blue" may mean blue, although the word itself is not blue. Similarly, continuity may be an arrangement meant by a discontinuous arrangement of symbols and words.

In the third place, the anti-intellectualist polemic is based upon the misconception that whenever concepts are used they must be used "privatively," in James's sense. In other words, it is taken for granted that all intellectualism must be "vicious," or blind to its own abstractness. James distinguishes this view as one variety of intellectualism. To conceive a thing as *a*, and then assume that it is *only a*, is to be "viciously" intellectual. But it is only fair to infer that, provided one recognizes that to be *a* does not prevent a thing's being also *b*, *c*, etc., one may be innocently or even beneficially intellectual. And this possibility Bergson, at any rate, appears to overlook. Thus he constantly argues as though the use of the relational logic involved the reduction of everything to it. The analytical method does imply that reality consists of terms and relations. It does *not*, however, imply that the bare term-and-relation-character is all there is to it. Thus blue is different from red, which is a case of $t'(R)t^2$. But in the concrete case the bare logical term-character, *t*, is united first with one quality, and then with another, while *R* is not merely relation in general, but the specific relation of "difference." And similarly the formulas of mathematics, mechanics, physics, etc., while they are cases of logical systems, have each their special superadded and distinguishing characters.

Thus the abstract logical system is non-temporal; but a temporal system may nevertheless be a *case* of a logical system, provided the time character be introduced. Hence it is absurd to say, as Bergson says, that "when the mathematician calculates the future state of a system at the end of a time *t*, there is nothing to prevent him from supposing that the universe vanishes from this moment till that, and suddenly reappears. It is the *t*-th moment only that counts—and that will be a mere instant. What will flow on in the interval—that is to say, real time—does not count, and can not enter into the calculation."¹ I can make nothing of this, unless the author is regarding *t* merely as a *number*. But as a matter of fact *t* is a number of units of *time*, hence an interval, an extended flow; and multiplying this factor into the formula means that the whole process has continued *through* that interval—it means that the lapse of time is counted, is expressly brought into the calculation.

¹ "Creative Evolution," p. 22.

Or, consider the same author's contention that to conceive time is to spacialize it. Again he is misled by supposing that because time is conceived as orderly, it is therefore *nothing but* order. Such an intellectualism would indeed be vicious. Bare logical order is static, and can never of itself express time. But it is an utterly different matter to regard time, like space and number, as a *case* of order, having the specific time *quale* over and above the properties of order. "Position," "interval," "before" and "after," are then to be taken in the temporal sense; and the terms of the series are to be taken, not as bare logical terms, still less as spacial points, but as instants possessing a unique time-character of their own.

Radical anti-intellectualism betrays, in short, a misapprehension of the analytical method. This method means simply the discrimination and specification of the detail of experience. It has led to the discovery and systematic description of certain elements and relationships that possess a remarkably high degree of generality, such, *e. g.*, as those of logic and mathematic. But while these elements and relationships, because of their generality, serve to make things commensurable on a comprehensive scale, and are consequently of a peculiar importance in knowledge, it does not follow that intellectualism aims to abolish everything else. That which *has* form is not *pure* form. Furthermore, it is entirely incorrect to suppose that intellectualism imposes the relational and orderly arrangement regardless of the subject-matter. The analytical method is not an accident or prejudice. It arises from the fact that the subject-matter with which science and philosophy deal is *complex*. And this is virtually admitted in every reference to it which anti-intellectualistic writers make. Continuity, duration, activity and life, present, even in the most immediate experience of them which it is possible to obtain, an unmistakable multiplicity of character. They may be divided, and their several characters abstracted and named in turn, because they *contain variety*. The anti-intellectualist is apparently ready to admit their multiplicity, but balks at admitting their "distinct multiplicity."⁸ But "distinctness" and "indistinctness" are psychological and not ontological differences. An "indistinct multiplicity" is simply a multiplicity that is as yet but imperfectly known, a distinct multiplicity in things, qualified by an incompleteness of discrimination.

But anti-intellectualism is involved in a more serious error. It not only misunderstands the view which it attacks; but it puts forth a claim of its own which is unfounded—the claim, namely, to the immediate apprehension of a fused and inarticulate unity. It

⁸ *Ibid.*, Introduction, p. xiv.

exploits what may conveniently be named the error of "pseudo-simplicity."⁹

This error consists in projecting a verbal or subjective simplicity into the object. The single *word* "life," *e.g.*, is used to refer to the complex *thing*, life. It is then assumed that behind the various characters of life, or infusing them, there must be a corresponding unity. Or, at the outset of inquiry life is a problematic unity, a bare *that*, a something-to-be-known; and it is assumed that this simple *quale*, this merging of elements not-yet-but-to-be-distinguished, must somehow be among the elements themselves. Now there are two ways of unifying experience. One way is to *carry analysis through*, and discover the connections of the parts and the articulate structure of the whole. The other is to reverse the operation, to *carry it back* to its vanishing point—to the bare word or the bare feeling of attention. In the second case the experience is simplified—by the disappearance of the object! A perfect simplicity, an ineffable unity, is attained at the point where the object drops out altogether. But then knowledge has ceased; and the experience, what there is of it, is of no cognitive significance whatsoever. Thus Bergson says: "The more we succeed in making ourselves conscious of our progress in pure duration, the more we feel the different parts of our being enter into each other, and our whole personality concentrate itself in a point."¹⁰ What Bergson is here describing is, I am convinced, the disappearance of cognition into an experience which is not an experience of anything at all. Such a unification may be obtained by falling asleep, as by auto-hypnosis. It throws no light whatever on the nature of anything. My experience of life has dissolved; but nothing follows concerning the nature of life. I have simply closed my eyes to it. I have blurred and blotted out my knowledge of life; but life is not therefore blurred or extinct. In the twilight all things are gray; in ignorance all things are simple. Bergson speaks of the "feeling of duration" as "the actual coinciding of ourself with itself";¹¹ and this, he says, admits of degrees. But I am not more alive when I feel duration than I was before when I thought it. The difference is that whereas I formerly knew duration, or something of it, now I know comparatively nothing; I simply *am* duration. Duration itself is neither more nor less complex than it was before; my knowledge only has been simplified—to the point of disappearance. Bergson speaks of an instinctive sympathy, which if it "could extend its object and also reflect upon itself," "would give us the key to

⁹ Cf. my article "Realism as a Polemic and Program of Reform," this JOURNAL, Vol. VII., No. 13.

¹⁰ "Creative Evolution," p. 201.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

vital operations.''¹² But I believe that it is safe to say that in proportion as there is reflection upon instinct, its complexity is manifest, and that in proportion as instinct is simple, it has escaped experience altogether, and is, so far as cognition is concerned, nothing.

The critique of intellectualism tends to assume one or the other of two forms. Using Dewey's term "immediatism" to express this doctrine positively rather than negatively, we may say that there is a subjectivistic or idealistic version of immediatism and a realistic version of immediatism. The crucial issue upon which the idealistic and realistic versions of immediatism divide is whether the activity of the intellect is creative or selective. Does the intellect *generate* concepts, or does it *discover* them?

If we are to judge from the "Creative Evolution," Bergson regards the intellect as an artificer. In other words, ideas, things, objects, are essentially "the modalities of creative action."¹³ In the end they express not the environment but the agent. It is by no means clear that this is consistent with Bergson's view, that intellect is a means of adaptation. "If," as he himself says, "the intellectual form of the living being has been gradually modeled on the reciprocal actions and reactions of certain bodies and their material environment, how should it not reveal to us something of the very essence of which these bodies are made?"¹⁴ But this query does not prevent Bergson from deriving "intellectual form" from the intellect itself. The origin of it is to be looked for "in the structure of our intellect, which is formed to act on matter from without, and which succeeds by making, in the flux of the real, instantaneous cuts, each of which becomes, in its fixity, endlessly decomposable. . . . *This complexity is the work of the understanding.*"¹⁵ In other words, the *relational texture*, the *grain* of things, is generated by intellect. Given matter, not yet intellectualized, is pure flux, in its own substance as simple, smooth, and undivided as the life which acts on it—the life of which it is but the "inverse" movement.¹⁶ According to this view, then, to conceive is to bring into being that which is called concept. Conceptual definiteness is the derivative of the pure activity of intellect, and is in no sense contained in that upon which intellect operates.

According to the realistic version of immediatism, on the other hand, the intellect discovers, but does not make, concepts. This is

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 176.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Introduction, p. xi.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 250 (italics mine).

¹⁶ While the work of intellect is not absolutely creative, in that there is something on which it works, the latter would appear to be only a potentiality or negation.

the view that is on the whole consistently maintained by James. Concepts are not merely functions of the intellect, they constitute a "coordinate realm" of reality. "If we take the world of geometrical relations, the thousandth decimal of π sleeps there, though no one may ever try to compute it."¹⁷ "Philosophy must thus recognize many realms of reality which mutually interpenetrate. The conceptual systems of mathematics, logic, ethics, are such realms, each strung upon some peculiar form of relation, and each differing from perceptual reality in that in no one of them is history or happening displayed. *Perceptual reality involves and contains all these ideal systems and vastly more besides.*"¹⁸ The crux of the matter lies in this last statement. Reality is not *other* than the conceptual order, but *more* than the conceptual order. Intellect is an organ, not of fabrication, but of "discernment"; a power men have "to single out the most fugitive elements of what passes before them . . . aspect within aspect, quality after quality, relation upon relation."¹⁹

When thus construed, the pragmatist account of intellect is consistent with naturalistic grounds of pragmatism. Concepts work because the environment is presented and displayed in them. Since nature has logical and mathematical properties, it is expedient to act as though it had; while an intellect that was fatally predestined to falsify the environment would be as misleading to action as it would be inherently arbitrary and meaningless. And this realistic construction of concepts is entirely consistent with a censure of their blind and uncritical use. Because nature is logical and mathematical, it does not follow that it is *merely* logical and mathematical. Such an intellectualism is vicious indeed. The abstracting of *some* characters of reality is beset by a characteristic error, the error of ignoring the rest. This follows from the fact that intellect is *selective*; it in no way implies that intellect is creative. It is also true that in a sense the perceptual world is richer than the conceptual, since the latter is abstracted *from* it, leaving a residuum behind. James, it is true, goes further than this and contends, with Bergson, that there are some properties of reality, the "dynamic" or "temporal" properties, which can not be conceived.²⁰ But this is due, I think, to a misunderstanding. If to conceive is not to alter, but only to *distinguish*, then conceiving is not contrary to any property; to mention a property with a view to showing its inconceivability is to conceive it. And all properties stand on the same footing with

¹⁷ James, "Meaning of Truth," pp. 42 (note), 203.

¹⁸ "Some Problems of Philosophy," pp. 101-102 (italics mine). Cf. also *op. cit.*, p. 56; "Pluralistic Universe," pp. 339-340 (note).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 52.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 81, 101.

reference to the function of mediation. All may be known meditately; but to know them meditately is only an indirect way of knowing them immediately. This is as true of a mathematical triangle, which is meditately known by means of these words, as of color, life, or anything else. When corrected in the light of these considerations, the realistic anti-intellectualism of James escapes the verbalism and abstractionism of "vicious intellectualism," without that discrediting of analysis and lapse into uncritical intuition—that dissolution of order into chaos, which marks an even more vicious immediatism.

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PHILOSOPHY AND THE FLATFISH

THERE has recently appeared a monograph¹ by Francis B. Sumner, of the United States Fisheries Laboratory at Woods Hole, Massachusetts, which contains a number of facts important to all philosophers who are endeavoring to construct a new world-view. There are two reasons why these facts should be here reported and discussed: first, zoologists, under whose eyes alone the monograph is likely to fall, are unfortunately not interested in the philosophical implications of their *own* researches; and, secondly, philosophers mostly refrain from analyzing such *very* empirical matters as, say, the behavior of the flatfish, and distrust every other philosopher who dares wander so far from his own bailiwick, which is supposed to include little more than "pure logic" and "pure experiences." The consequence of this mutual aloofness is that most philosophers are very wretched biologists and most biologists no less wretched philosophers. When, therefore, a fact is brought to light which is absolutely unequivocal and empirically demonstrated and laden with implications about the nature of organic adjustments, percepts, and the perceiving process, it should be proclaimed.

Such a fact is found in Sumner's study. It interests me peculiarly because it completely confirms, by experimentation, the central point of my conclusions about the retinal image and the imitative reflex.² My own inferences were reached by an analysis of a few somewhat obscure psychological events. In order to follow the analysis, the reader had to observe those events with severe accuracy;

¹ "The Adjustment of Flatfishes to Various Backgrounds," *Journal of Experimental Zoology*, Vol. X., No. 4.

² This JOURNAL, Vol. VII., pp. 92 and 204. The second of these papers was read, in part, before the American Philosophical Association, December, 1909.